

# Enchanting the Audience: Provocative Impacts on the Viewing Public in Steven Millhauser's "Eisenheim the Illusionist"

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## 1. Introduction

Steven Millhauser, (1943-) winner of the 1997 Pulitzer Prize for *Martin Dressler: The Tale of An American Dreamer* (1996), has produced various short story collections. He explains why he prefers writing short stories, saying that:

The short story ... is inherently selective. By excluding almost everything, it can give perfect shape to what remains. And the short story can even lay claim to a kind of completeness that eludes the novel — after the initial act of radical exclusion, it can include all of the little that's left. ("The Ambition of the Short Story")

Compared to the traditional full-length novel, the short story can describe a world perfectly yet modestly. In light of portraying the real world, the writer creates his own fictional world in miniature. As if to support what he said in his interview, it is apparent that Millhauser repeatedly uses similar motifs in his short stories such as automata, the theater, illusions, exhibition, and an excited audience. "Millhauser's narrators also serve to break the illusion of realism. Their voices mimic a great spectrum of literary styles, undermining any initial certitude regarding our geographical and historical location" (*The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 8). He examines how the power relationship created between an imaginary situation and the reaction by the audience with serves as an illustration of our uncanny world.

"Eisenheim the Illusionist," found in Millhauser's fifth collection, *The Barnum Museum* (1990), considers the historical background of Vienna from the late nineteenth to the early twenties. The tale shows the outstanding performance of Eisenheim, an illusionist arousing excitement and enthusiasm in people, and the overall powerful reaction of the audience. The protagonist Eisenheim, a great cabinet-

maker in his youth, became a conjurer following a chance meeting with a man who showed him some magic. Eisenheim's unique and original illusions attract an ever-growing audience, and his fame spreads throughout the Viennese populace. In the final scene, he evades capture by the police and effectively erases himself. The narrator refers to the era in which the story takes place, as in "August Eschenburg," where the historical background is late 18th century Germany. Moreover, the opening of the story references certain symptoms that lead to the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire. When reading this story it is important to consider how the political system of the day was maintained and how artists were recognized in 19th century Austria. Not only a commentary on the time, "Eisenheim's illusions unsettle the way audiences understand magic, but they also unsettle how they understand the known world" (*The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 100). Although Eisenheim's aim seems apparent, the particular implication of his tricks remains unclear. Eisenheim pays no regard to the size of the audience or the financial situation; on the contrary, his sole plan is to perform his illusions with eagerness and passion. At this point it is vital to mention a notable character in the story, police chief Uhl, as he is the only person given a name in the story. This leads one to ask why the police officer has a name, and what important roles he plays in the story. Focusing on the trio of relationships found in the story, the one between Eisenheim and Herr Uhl, the chief of the police, the one between Herr Uhl and the audience, and finally the one between the audience and Eisenheim himself, this paper elucidates the hidden implications of the illusionist, in light of the historical background. The illusionist's intentions are further explored by comparing the reactions of audiences in three of Millhauser's other short stories, "The Knife Thrower," "The New Automaton Theater," and "August Eschenburg." In

closing, this paper discusses the possibility that the illusions help subvert the audience's acceptance of the government, and builds on these motifs to examine how Millhauser develops the relationship between art and politics in his stories.

## 2. Historical Background, the Police and the Illusionist

One of the notable reasons why "Eisenheim the Illusionist" contrasts to other Millhauser short stories is that the setting of the story is explicitly identified. In his other stories, such as "August Eschenburg," although historical background is discussed, the opening of "Eisenheim the Illusionist" clearly indicates it. "Eisenheim the Illusionist" combines historical references and fictional depictions of the world. Thus, it is possible that readers will confuse whether the story describes reality or is a mere fabrication. For example, the story begins as follows:

In the last years of the nineteenth century, when the Empire of the Hapsburgs was nearing the end of its long dissolution, the art of magic flourished as never before. .... It was the age of levitations and decapitations, of ghostly apparitions and sudden vanishings, as if the tottering Empire were revealing through the medium of its magicians its secret desire for annihilation. (215)

These sentences indicate that the story takes place in the late nineteenth century, and that at that time magic flourished. Historically, stage magic really did prosper then, as seen in the remarkable works of Robert-Houdin or Harry Houdini. Therefore, reading the first page of the story misleads readers, perhaps, into considering the story to be based on actual historical facts. Moreover, as though he is a fictional person, the story describes the most significant character: "Eisenheim, né Eduard Abramowitz, was born in Bratislava in 1859 or 1860. Little is known of his early years, or indeed of his entire life outside the realm of illusion" (216). In short, by looking into the beginning of the story, it is apparent that depictions intermingle with historical references and fabulous characters. It is puzzling and important to consider why the author tried to blend reality and fiction this way. In answering this question, indications by Mary Kinzie are suggestive, for she analyzed the similarities and the differences among the works in *The Barnum Museum* by Steven Millhauser, some works by Jorge Luis Borges, and a letter by Franz Kafka. In her paper, she

argued:

He [Millhauser] blurs both the characters' focus and the focusability of the outer landscapes and events. And in these new stories [*The Barnum Museum*] Millhauser has accomplished a remarkable compression of the realistic with the fantastic, creating in effect his own subtle, clever, funny, breathtaking, and delightful mode of magical realism. ("Succeeding Borges, Escaping Kafka: On the Fiction of Steven Millhauser" 116)

Especially interesting in her argument is the claim that the works by Millhauser have an element of magical realism, which originally referred to aesthetic elements in German art, then to literary trends in Latin American Literature. As Kinzie pointed out, Millhauser used the magical realist mode in many of his works. In the case of "Eisenheim the Illusionist," for example, the mixed description with both the historical reality and fictional references is characteristic of magical realism. This literary method leads both readers and characters in works to approach reality from unfamiliar and extraordinary points of view. In other words, "Eisenheim, the Illusionist" uncovers hidden aspects in the real world, by putting the bizarre world that the illusionist creates on the stage beside actual events.

In particular, the confrontation occurring between the illusionist and the police chief, Walter Uhl clearly emphasizes how the history and the fiction are intermingled. The police chief alters his role according to the types of illusions Eisenheim performs. Initially, he is fascinated by the performances, but gradually he becomes an adversary who tries to arrest the illusionist. Something in Eisenheim's illusions clearly makes him harden his stance. He confesses in his notebook that "he appears to mean that certain distinctions must be strictly maintained. Art and life constituted one such distinction; illusion and reality, another. Eisenheim deliberately crossed boundaries and therefore disturbed the essence of things" (235). Such transgressions lead Uhl to decide to arrest Eisenheim. Again, what does the boundary mean? Does these boundaries incorporate the border between the stage and the viewing audience? Referring to the historical background, this section examines the power relationships that exist among the illusionist with his illusions on the stage, the audience in the theater, and the police officer Uhl sitting between the illusionist and the audience. Making reference to the social circumstances encompassing the illusionist

in 19th century Austria, this section explores what implications can be drawn from the audience's reaction.

In "Eisenheim the Illusionist," there are descriptions that indicate fundamental conflicts. For example, the narrator describes a scene of many illusionists flourishing: "[i]t was the age of levitations and decapitations, of ghostly apparitions and sudden vanishings, as if the tottering Empire were revealing through the medium of its magician its secret desire for annihilation" ("Eisenheim the Illusionist" 215). These sentences depict the turn of the century as a time when a profound connection between the collapse of empire and the prosperity of illusionists exists. This is a turning point for the society of the time, when long-existing values are changing rapidly. The more the illusionists seem to flourish, the faster the empire seems to decline. The illusionist embodies the contradictions hidden in both the empire and in the minds of its inhabitants. Among the audience, as a representative of law enforcement, Uhl observes Eisenheim's stage performance. Despite being an observer of the show, Uhl, in his role as the police chief and in his implication to arrest Eisenheim, demonstrates an unwavering support for authority, the power of the Hapsburgs, and for maintaining the current social order. Uhl holds out against Eisenheim in order to preserve the authority of the empire and to protect its dignity, careful to identify anything that might undermine this authority. Thus, he keeps a keen eye on Eisenheim's stage, particularly when he performs an illusion involving the boy Elis. "Herr Uhl was once again seen in attendance at the theater, watching with an expression of keen interest" (232). He perceives the violent power of Eisenheim's magic to blur reality and fiction, and he recognizes that this power could erase the boundary between, authority, power and the nation.

An interactive relationship exists between the illusionist and the audience, namely, the illusionist entertains the spectators with his magic, while the spectators show their satisfaction with admiring applause. With this mechanical connection in mind, Pedro Ponce has pointed out that:

It is this sense of involvement that arguably raises the stakes of a theatrical performance, not simply in terms of how it is received but how it works with or against the cultural context represented by the audience. ... In this way, the theatrical performance is unique in its potential for representing

cultural flux as mediated by art. (*The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 92)

The audience's reaction to the illusionist expresses their unconscious feelings of cultural instability, a common theme found in Millhauser's other short stories. For instance, in his story "The Knife Thrower," the protagonist, the knife thrower, shows his considerable talent when he throws a knife accurately at a chosen member of the audience. Though the knife strikes this particular individual's heart, readers are still uncertain about what happens at the end of the story. After the show, they think that "[a]fter all, if such performances were encouraged, if they were even tolerated, what might we expect in the future? Would any of us be safe? The more we thought about it, the uneasier we became..." (18). The ambiguous feelings that the audience feels about the situation on the stage morph into a sense of insecurity toward the actual world they live in. It is noteworthy that in the minds of the people who attended the show the atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the fictional stage events connects with the sense of distrust that they feel towards their own lived reality, which on a larger scale both the police and other government authorities of the time were afraid to have exposed.

Further to this point, Susan Bennett, who has written numerous studies about the relationships between performers and audiences, indicates:

It is evident that they [the audience], like the artist, have ideas and values which are socially formed and which are similarly mediated. As the artist works within the technical means available and within the scope of aesthetic convention, so audiences read constituted interpretive processes. ... In order to identify and understand the cultural markers which designate and endorse the existence of theatre in a particular society, it is helpful to look at some general investigations of culture. (*Theatre Audience* 99)

She explains that because many theaters in Germany received economic assistance from the government, this resulted in the establishment of a government-controlled ideological system. In short, the role of the theater was not only for entertainment but also for education. In fact, certain satirical dramas that mocked authority, the nation, or history were forbidden from being performed at theaters during this era. Because political censorship in European countries was widely imposed on the arts and print media, ranging from dramas to sculptures to posters, it is unquestionable that the police feared any

uncertain features of artistic performances. August Boal usually interprets such a situation in clear political terms.

A theater that attempts to change the changers of society cannot lead to repose, cannot re-establish equilibrium. The bourgeois police tries to re-establish equilibrium, to enforce repose: a Marxist artist, on the other hand, must promote the movement toward national liberation and toward the liberation of the class oppressed by capital. ... The former desire a quiet somnolence at the end of the spectacle; Brecht wants the theatrical spectacle to be the beginning of the action: the equilibrium should be sought by transforming society, and not by purging the individual of his just demands and needs. (*Theater of the Oppressed* 86-87)

This argument elucidates how the performance and the police played their respective roles in the ideological struggle, and how the audience may become skeptical about the society by experiencing vicariously what they view on stage. The authorities insisted that stage performances needed to be practical and instructive, lest they jolt society out of its harmonious conformity. Regarding this point, Robert Justin Goldstein, in *Political Censorship of the Arts and the Press in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, argued that “censors were primarily concerned with material that was viewed as threatening the existing socio-political order (and even allegedly obscene and blasphemous material was often viewed as a threat largely because it challenged the official standards of the ruling elements)” (118). This censorship was carried out on the principle of “defence of the social class in power and respect for the established order” (118). Thus, the plays were censored if in the eyes of the censors there existed the possibility that the public might be misled. Put another way, the playwrights and illusionists of the day attempted to disturb the social order in a more covert manner by expressing their ideological mistrust indirectly on the stage.

Under such circumstances, Eisenheim challenges the political system using his illusions. For example, unlike the other illusionists and magicians of the day who relied on tools and apparatus to achieve their conjurations and apparitions, by leading the audience to believe that he creates a human-shaped phantom using nothing more than his eyes Eisenheim stirs the audiences’ imaginations in a manner like never before. He “gathered himself up and fixed her [Greta] with his stare; gradually she wavered and grew dim, and slowly vanished” (“Eisenheim the Illusionist” 230).

Each audience member makes the connection between the illusion, Greta, and the historical tragedy that befell Empress Elizabeth: while traveling in Switzerland, an anarchist stabbed her through the heart. One of her children, Prince Rudolf, committed suicide with a prostitute before his mother’s assassination. However, the fact that people make a connection between the violent or insolent illusions Eisenheim produces and the two deaths that befell the Hapsburgs implies a conflict exists between the authority of a charismatic powerful tyrant and Eisenheim, a revolutionary destroyer of social conformity. The illusion Greta shakes the boundary between authority and the people, as if suggesting that the soul of her majesty can be manipulated. This conflict in particular stands out because of the changes occurring within the social construct of the day.

In “Eisenheim the Illusionist,” the illusions are listed chronologically, and the reactions of the respective audiences are also depicted. Their reactions imply that they do not merely enjoy the tricks, but feel a certain malaise. Unlike most typical magic of that era, which can be plausibly explained as a mere trick, Eisenheim’s performances remain ambiguous and unsettling even though some are based on well-known, traditional illusions. Thus, the audience feels conflicted: while they applaud the brilliance of the illusionist, they are left with an indefinable impression about the true motives behind his efforts. The illusionist encourages these feelings as if to use his illusions as covert inspiration to encourage the overthrow of the political system. The police, represented by Herr Uhl, intend to halt the change and prevent the audience from awakening to the possibility of a revolution. This story depicts not only the waxing of the popularity of illusions and people’s reaction to them but also the struggle between those intent on maintaining the regime’s public order and those agitating against the current societal situation.

### 3. The Illusionist as an Agitator, and the Police Officer as a Guardian of the Law

It certainly seems strange that Uhl enjoys the stage magic even as he clings to the notion of protecting the authority of the regime and he regards Eisenheim as a suspicious character. This section analyzes the role of Herr Uhl as a guardian of the law, and the suspicious points of the performances of Eisenheim, to clarify the reason for their conflict. The authority that Herr Uhl represents is clearly authoritarian, although not tyrannical.

Uhl stands out in “Eisenheim the Illusionist.” The audience talks of Uhl as a member of the secret

police, and he sits among audience without muttering the slightest word, emphasizing his role as the protector of authority. Moreover, he discovers Eisenheim's purpose "of shaking the foundations of the universe, of undermining reality, and in consequence of doing something far worse: subverting the Empire. For where would the Empire be, once the idea of boundaries became blurred and uncertain?" (235). He perceives the violent implications in Eisenheim's illusions that could contribute to the subversion of the political system and ultimately, the overthrow of the regime. Eisenheim attempts to shake the audience out of its unconscious stupor through his magic, and Uhl is the only person who realizes it. When Herr Uhl acts as a maintainer of the law, his mere presence affects the audiences as if it were a symbol of the law.<sup>1</sup> Entrusted to protect the social order, Uhl conducts surveillance of Eisenheim in order to censor what the illusionist does on stage and to prevent him from encouraging subversive thoughts or activities. On the other hand, as if Eisenheim demonstrating the authority of the empire is an illusion, Eisenheim produces a nameless, imaginary boy among the audience members. This performance works to erase the boundary that previously existed between them and the illusion. By creating this unsettling situation, Eisenheim appears to have crossed the threshold Uhl finds most threatening. To sum up, the violent power found within his performance renders dubious not only the boundary between the seats and the stage but also the credibility of the empire. If Uhl were not sitting in front of the spectators, Eisenheim could eliminate the obvious boundary between the actual and the imaginary, between the conscious human being and the unconsciousness one.

The last scene of the story indicates that the law ultimately defeats the quiet but incendiary illusionist. However, it is a thought-provoking moment. The inspector Uhl decides to arrest Eisenheim in order to maintain the social system, so before the eyes of all in the audience he "announced the arrest of Eisenheim in the name of His Imperial Majesty and the City of Vienna" (235). This statement forces the audience to clearly recognize the regime's authority and the importance it places on retaining social discipline. Unfortunately for him, the arrest is unsuccessful as

Eisenheim uses his powers of illusion to disappear before the eyes of the viewers. However, Uhl's aim to protect civil order is described after this failure: "[H]err Uhl promptly arrested a young man in the front row, and a precarious order was maintained" (236). It is clear everything someone must feel the power of the police, under the pretext of maintaining order, and anyone will do. It appears that Uhl's scheme results in failure; however, after all was said and done, "[a]ll agreed that it was a sign of the times" (237), implying that Eisenheim succeeded in shaking up the audience's thoughts toward authority and power, as he secretly intended. On account of his disappearance through the obliteration of every last trace of his illusions, Eisenheim encourages people in the town to recognize that the regime's authority is also illusionary.

In "Eisenheim the Illusionist," the illusionist tries to subvert the conception of common sense. Eisenheim's illusions question whether intangible notions, such as common sense, really exist or are mere figments of people's imaginations. Uhl is the only direct link to the power of the regime and its authority. By comparing Uhl's staid reactions to those of amazement, acclamation, and awe by the audience, the opinions of Herr Uhl are shown to represent the role of law preserver. This story implies how authority affects the populace unconsciously, and elucidates the struggle between the illusionist, who makes people doubt their common sense, and legitimated law, which intends to curb the illusions' influence on the people.

#### 4. Rumors and the Group Dynamics

It seems as if the individual creates the group in many of Millhauser's stories, such as "Eisenheim the Illusionist" and "The Knife Thrower." One reason is that the audience members are described as anonymous, and the other is that the audiences create links via art, which acts as a glue that binds the audience members together. "Eisenheim, the Illusionist" also succeeds in exemplifying how the political system was managed and maintained in Vienna at the outset of the twentieth century by illustrating this antagonism using the police and the illusionist and his unsuccessful arrest. Not only in this short story but also in others Millhauser uses

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, who suggests that "the police are vested with privilege to exercise violence over someone who disturbed order," and "empowered to forbid the performance of a play if the effect of the performance is considered to be likely to create a danger to public peace, security and order" (*From Naturalism to Expressionism* 266).

artists as main characters in order to create a fantastical atmosphere surrounding the chosen art within the story. The artificial success described in each story contains a covert meaning. Analyzing the artistic performances not only in “Eisenheim the Illusionist,” but also those found in “The Knife Thrower,” “The New Automaton Theater” and “August Eschenburg,” helps to exemplify the interactions between the artist and the audience, and the power of the performance on the stage. Herr Uhl recognizes the possibility that “Eisenheim deliberately crossed boundaries and therefore disturbed the essence of things,” (“Eisenheim, the Illusionist” 235). This section conducts an analysis of artistic performances and explores how art affects the audiences and what is expressed within the illusions.

Eisenheim intends to make use of the potential influence of illusion. In addition, the artists in Millhauser’s stories, using their performances which explain nothing directly, try to dramatically provoke uncanny feelings in the minds of the viewers. As the events on stage are vague and inexplicable, the performance undermines the stability of the public’s worldview. An example of this is the scene in which the rumor spreads among the audience. Eisenheim’s illusions defy common wisdom shared throughout society, and produce unsettling effects.

In considering how art influences spectators, one needs to clarify the mechanism by which it does this. To illustrate this point, the depiction in Millhauser’s “The New Automaton Theater” is instructive.

In the classic automaton theater we are asked to share the emotions of human beings, whom in reality we know to be miniature automatons. In the new automaton theater we are asked to share the emotions of automatons themselves. ... And the new automatons begin to obsess us, they penetrate our minds, they multiply within us, they inhabit our dreams. (108-110)

This quotation explains that a mere automaton is able to become an obsession of the audience and manipulate their minds and common sense, altering their manner of thinking and their conception of the world. A similar description appears in “Eisenheim the Illusionist.” What Eisenheim achieves with his performance is an assimilation of reality and illusion within the spectators’ minds. For example, when inspector Uhl decides to arrest the illusionist, the illusionary boy Elis “murmured “No” in his angelic voice, while Rosa

hugged herself tightly and began to hum a low melody that sounded like a drawn-out moan or keen” (“Eisenheim, the Illusionist” 235) and as “ someone in the audience began murmuring “No,” the chant was taken up”. (235) This scene suggests that members of the real audience and the fictitious illusions of Eisenheim seem to share the same feelings. Thus the audience has strong negative feelings towards the police officer in the scene when he attempts to arrest the illusionist. Notably, the illusionist both generates and obliterates life throughout his performance. People in the theater witness numerous images of life and death, while enjoying the illusionary world unfolding on the stage. When the illusionist verges on death, the audience feels tangible fear and also experience the same situation as that presented by the illusion on stage. These scenes describe how the audience interacts unconsciously with the illusions or artworks, leaving the viewer questioning what are real and what are not.

The art and artists fascinate the audience, that is, the art has a shared effect on their feelings as a group. It is apparent in Millhauser’s short stories that the rumors and comments that occur after performances play an important role in expressing the range of the audiences’ emotions, including shock and mystification. Such reactions also shed important light on how the spectators conceive what they saw and how they bring to a resolution within their own minds the peculiar questions that had arisen. Furthermore, it is useful to analyze how individual audience members match the over-arching feeling of the crowd as the rumor spreads. Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic, in light of the description of the audience, is its anonymousness. Pedro Ponce emphasizes this use of collective groups in Millhauser’s fiction (“‘a game we no longer understand’: Theatrical Audiences in the Fiction of Steven Millhauser” 91). Moreover, Millhauser comments in an interview with Marc Chénier:

In any case, I found myself increasingly drawn to this pronoun [we], partly because it allowed me to enact the drama of an entire community set against a person or group that threatens it, and partly because the pronoun felt new and exciting, a pronoun that didn’t drag in its wake one hundred billion stories, as in the case of an “I” or a “he.” It strikes me as a barely explored pronoun, full of possibilities, and I’m certainly not done with it.

Millhauser depicts the society or the group in terms of a loss of individual identity. The comments from the audience

members who are witnessing the art performance reflect not an individual lifestyle but instead a reflection of public thought at the time. Simply put, the group reflects the current social environment. In addition, the crowd as a group is further developed using the rumors found in the stories. Rumors are likewise important. For example, in the tale “The Knife Thrower,” the townspeople are excited about the impending arrival of a knife thrower; however, their enthusiasm is tempered somewhat by their concern for “certain disturbing rumors” surrounding this unique individual (“The Knife Thrower” 3). The townspeople duly consider the rumors, and having “questioned the rumors, tried to recall what we knew of him, interrogated ourselves relentlessly,” (4) they decide to take part in the show. This scene illustrates that despite rumors and concerns, the townspeople’s excited reaction to the news that the noteworthy knife thrower is coming to the city. Here the pronoun, “we”, functions as the symbol of a group without individual identity. It is shown that the townspeople are connected by not only the one night show but also by the rumors about the showman. The reaction such unidentified audiences show in the theater represents a facet of group dynamism. In an early classic study, Gustave Le Bon discusses the psychology of a crowd and explains that an important factor is contagion.

Contagion is a phenomenon of which it is easy to establish the presence, but that it is not easy to explain. It must be classed among those phenomena of a hypnotic order, which we shall shortly study. In a crowd every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest. (*The Crowd* 19)

Once a feeling or a thought establishes itself among particular individuals, it may spread throughout the remainder of the group. The members in one group are confused into thinking as if they share the same feelings, which could lead to the epidemic hysteria. In “Eisenheim, the Illusionist,” there is a description of how a contagion spreads: “[t]he child, a boy of about six, walked down the aisle and climbed the stairs to the stage, where he stood smiling at the audience, who immediately recognized that he was of the race of Elis and Rosa. Although the mysterious child never appeared again, spectators now began to look nervously at their neighbors; ...” (234). This scene shows that following the illusory unnamed boy’s initial appearance, he continues to exist in the minds of the spectators. Due to the ambiguity surrounding this boy, a suspicion forms, spreads throughout the theater and remains

in people’s minds, where they begin to wonder whether or not someone among the audience is such a fictitious individual, of such a race. It is remarkable how a feeling of fear circulates rapidly throughout the theater.

This transmission of a common feeling can be found not only amongst the small groups within the audience but also amongst the townspeople as the rumors relating to the illusion circulate among them. Analysis of each description illuminates the mechanism by which the illusion succeeds in connecting individual’s minds in order to affect, alter and ultimately change the prevailing thoughts of the society at the time. For example, when the rumor that Eisenheim is going to be arrested spreads, “[s]ome said that Uhl had intended it from the beginning and had simply been waiting for the opportune moment; others pointed to particular incidents” (233-234). These different points of view imply that the prospect of arrest is brought into the people’s conversations and raises their interest for both illusions in general as well as anticipation for the next performance at the theater. Eisenheim’s illusions function not merely as entertainment for the audiences but also as a tool to gain their attention. Moreover, this point is underscored in the last scene when each spectator talks about the illusionist following his disappearance from the stage:

All agreed that it was a sign of the times; and as precise memories faded, and the everyday world of coffee cups, doctors’ visits, and war rumors returned, a secret relief penetrated the souls of the faithful, who knew that the Master had passed safely out of the crumbling order of history in the indestructible realm of mystery and dream. (237)

By simulating his own death in the show’s final illusion, Eisenheim captivates the hearts and minds of the viewers. The expression, “war rumor occurred” (237) indicates that for people living in a world where war appears imminent there exists a tangible yet unexplainable fear, and they hope that the performer will find himself in a peaceful world, unlike themselves, people who cannot escape the inevitability of war. Ultimately, both the spectators and the community share contagious feelings of fear, excitement, and awe regarding the incident. In this case, theater can lead to social change. Though a theater might seem merely a place where the performances are staged, the shows manipulate the feelings of the audience there. As mentioned before, the anonymous crowd, gathering in one place, can share the same emotions

or impressions about a staged performance. Using this psychological phenomenon, many artists in the history have performed inflammatory plays or tricks that cast doubt upon the daily assumptions of the audience. *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, explains this mechanism:

[T]he present-day world can only be described to present-day people if it is described as capable of transformation. People of the present-day value questions on account of their answers. They are interested in events and situations in face of which they can do something. (274)

When people see a situation enacted on the stage, they consider the event in relation to one from their own lives; thus, members of the audience in “Eisenheim the Illusionist” experience the show as if it were reality. This consideration of group dynamics and rumors shows us that the social situation can be altered when they argue about the uncanny and remarkable performances. The illusionist does not show his implication to foment revolution; however, when the audience members recognize his show in light of the social order, his revolutionary aim is achieved. The final scene illustrates not only the group dynamics of the audience and its development, but also the unstable state of Austro-Hungarian society at the time.

## 5. Conclusion

“Eisenheim the Illusionist” depicts, through the use of the illusionist’s astonishing performances, the animated reaction of the audience, and the conflict that played out in the first row involving the illusionist and the police officer who represents the guardians of the law and the current political system. By referring to the historical background, this story succeeds in making vague the boundary between the real events and the fictional situation, and thus, clarifies what hidden process are at work. For example, the theater was historically used as a place to enlighten the people; however, it was prohibited to deal with any theme that was contrary to the principles of the political system, or might incite seditious thoughts. The performances captivate the members of the audience and allow them to make a connection between the performance and the contemporary social situation. The illusionist thus deconstructs the common sense of the world for the audience and casts suspicion on the political system. Scenes and artists in Millhauser’s works represent the

possibility that works of art include an element which infects the minds of the spectators and forces them to reexamine the societal “truths” that they have for so long taken for granted. A powerful example of this audience reflection is when “Eisenheim” performs his illusion known as “Greta,” who was felt to embody Elizabeth, the deceased Hapsburg Empress among the general populace. This seeming astral connection with a beloved member of the monarchy works as a trigger of reflection for the audience, or on a grander scale his performances can be thought to portend impending social change. Millhauser’s provocative art, like Eisenheim’s, does not merely entertain the masses but through the use of subtle political elements has a powerful and perhaps unconscious influence on their ways of thinking.

Artists in Millhauser’s short stories exhibit their work on stage. While enjoying these performances, the audiences gradually form a cohesive group but it is also true that the spectators continually find a wide variety of interpretations for each piece. The lingering influence on the audiences shows that art has the power to change people’s minds. Each story by Millhauser deals with the relationship between the artists, their artworks, and the respective audiences; however, as the performances imply, the world played out on the stage reflects the current political situation within the society and the spectators are secretly infected by the illusionist’s embedded messages. At the beginning of the story, “Eisenheim the Illusionist” portrays a political system in decline, and depicts Eisenheim’s implications. Stories by Millhauser do not, however, indicate that the illusionists intend to use their performances to incite people to riot, or to overthrow the old regime. Indeed, within the stories the contemporary political system is neither explicitly criticized nor interpreted. However, by performing an extraordinary spectacle, the artists in the stories succeed not only in taking the audiences to a world analogous to the world within which they live, but also in confronting them with visualizations of the contradictions which lie hidden in their own lives.

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